

Jesus' Resurrection— And Ours

I Corinthians 15: 7-10a, 20-22. Acts 9:1-9.

Let's talk about Jesus' Resurrection —and ours. For Paul, there was a straight line of connection between them. I Corinthians, chapter 15, is his great sermon on the Resurrection, and he wants to remind us that Jesus' resurrection is the foretaste of our own. This may be down on the list of theological things we think much about. It was for the church at Corinth, which is why he wrote this chapter.

But before we get to that, let's talk about Jesus' resurrection appearance to Paul. He starts chapter 15 reporting Jesus' appearances to others—leaving out the women by the way. The Easter tradition of the church had already excised Jesus' appearance to the women, before, 30-60 years later, the gospels put the women back in. He calls the role of those to whom Jesus had appeared, then at the end, calls his own name:

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not in vain.

So let's move to Jesus' appearance to Paul in the book of Acts.

I

“Breathing threats and murder”, yes, threats and murder, against the disciples and young church, he was on his way for a new round of persecution, this time of the Christians in Damascus. Then it happened. Amid a flash of light from heaven, the risen Jesus appeared to him from the heavens, and Paul, who was then Saul, heard his voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

As I’ve offered before, Flannery O’Conner, in her Southern voice wrote: “I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” Sometimes life knocks us off our horse, sometimes love can. Amid blinding light and amazing grace, Paul was being called to be an apostle of the very one he was persecuting. He never got over the grace of it all.

When he opened his eyes, he could not see. Led like a blinded horse, Saul came to Damascus where a follower of Jesus, among those he was on his way to persecute, laid hands on him so he could see. “I once was lost, but now I’m found/ was blind but now I see.” Saul had died, and Paul rose from the ashes.

I don’t know where this story connects with you. There are more ways to experience grace than in a Damascus Road kind of experience, but when grace comes into our waywardness and failures, it marks us— for good.

Georgia poet David Bottoms has written a poem entitled “In A U-Haul North Of Damascus” about a man leaving all kinds of trouble and mistakes. He is parked in a field along Georgia highway 45, a few miles north of Damascus, Georgia. Here are some of its lines.

Lord, what are the sins

I have tried to leave behind me? The bad checks,

the workless days, the Scotch bottles thrown across the fence

and into the woods, the cruelty of silence,

the cruelty of lies, the jealousy,

the indifference?

What are these in the scale of sin

or failure

that they should follow me through the streets of Columbus....

Somewhere behind me,

miles behind me on a two-lane road that streaks across

west Georgia, light is falling

through the window of my half-empty house.

Lord , why am I thinking about this? And why should care

so long after everything has fallen

to pain

Could I be just another sinner who needs to be blinded

before he can see? Lord, is it possible to fall

toward grace?¹

I grew up hearing sermons with the fearful words about “falling from grace, falling from grace!” They missed the wonder of the gospel: that we and the whole human running race have, by the mercy of God, fallen ...toward grace.

II

And now, Paul is writing to the church at Corinth about the meaning of the Resurrection and about the resurrection appearances of Jesus that happened to him. These resurrection appearances in the NT were so varied they defy categorization. Jesus’ resurrection body, or what Paul called his “spiritual body”, a phrase that seems almost a contradiction in terms, was sometimes more

“physical” and some times more spiritual. He showed up in a room with locked doors. He ate fish. He seemed to be able to be everywhere at once. For Paul, he appeared in a vision in the heavens where he both saw and heard the risen Jesus.

I take this moment to explore this a bit because there have been so many futile arguments about the exact nature of Jesus’ resurrection appearances. If you can explain them, you are probably on the wrong track.

In the early 20th century the new Fundamentalist Movement began and published the Five Fundamentals you had to believe in order to be a Christian. Number Four was “The Bodily Resurrection of Christ”. But what did “bodily” mean? They were too sure about it. But the ways Jesus appeared were too varied for planting a definition.

Through the years, some trying to debunk the faith-claims for the resurrection have said that the disciples were lying as they tried to keep faith in Jesus alive after his death. Others have said they were mistaken, turning psychological needs into actual appearances. But none of this makes sense to me, for those appearances changed a small menagerie of followers into a band of believers who risked ridicule and defied fear and death to carry the Easter message to the world.

Who would die for something they made up? When they later got together and shared their stories, they did not let all the different ways Jesus appeared to them undermine their experience and conviction that God had raised Jesus from the grave. None of the gospels tell exactly the same stories—which makes these testimonies *more* reliable to me. They are not there not to argue us into belief but to invite us into belief. Above all, Christians should not use these resurrection appearances to bludgeon those who do not believe into belief or to claim religious superiority.

In Jesus' resurrection appearances, he shows up all over the place in ways that suggest that the space/time continuum has been suspended. Here in Jerusalem and Judea, there in Galilee—and the time sequence is indecipherable. One cannot reconstruct from the New Testament a chronology or geography that is coherent.

These experiences where the time/ space continuum seem to have been suspended have correspondences in moments in our lives. You smell something or hear something, and you are instantly transported to that time and place. We say things like “time stood still”, when it seems that timeless eternity has slipped down into our world and that moment is forever.

The poet Wordsworth in his poem “Intimations of Immortality” wrote of those experiences of eternity we have when we are young but begin to lose as we

grow older. “Trailing clouds of glory, we do come/From God who is our home.” But then later comes a kind of forgetting and a spiritual homesickness. And yet, there are those luminous moments of truth or beauty or love that give us “intimations of immortality”. These experiences, I think, help connect us with the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

Today Quantum Physics is being addressed by theologians to probe our old certainties about the physical world and spiritual dimensions of life. I would report more of that conversation, but I’d need six months off to read enough to report on it. All of which is to say, there is a lot more we don’t understand than what we do understand. The opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty.

III

Now, Paul, at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, wants to tell them that Jesus’ resurrection was a foretaste of what would happen to them at their deaths:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (that is, died). For as in a man (that is, Adam) came death, so also in Christ shall all be made alive!

Did you catch the word “ALL”? Some have tried to ignore that word and its hint of Universal Salvation. But “all” is one of the great words of Scripture. God has *all of us* in mind for salvation, for resurrection. Paul had experienced grace, and he knew it was headed for all.

Moving toward the climax of his resurrection chapter, Paul exclaims, “Lo, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed!” (As I told you before, I saw that scripture verse above the door of a church nursery: “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed!”)

There’s that word again: All! What could this mean, this “all” and this “being changed?” Is it possible to imagine with our holy imaginations that between our death and our entrance into the world to come that we will all be changed, changed into the persons God created us to be? That we will be with one another in the purest forms of ourselves. All lesser parts of ourselves are burned away, as gold is purified in the fire. Then we shall see each other in our true faces. The book of Revelation says that at the end we will be given a small white stone on which is written our own secret name.

Does this sound like good news to you? Is there anyone here who thinks they *don’t* need being changed!? John Donne, the poet and preacher of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London centuries ago, wrote and probably preached these words:

I shall rise from the dead,
from the prostration of death,
and never miss this sun, ...
for I shall see the Son of God
and shine myself as this sun shines.

I shall rise from the grave
and never miss this city
for I shall see the New Jerusalem.

He had read Paul's chapter on Resurrection!

IV

Let your imaginations ponder today your own resurrection. This past April 27 was the 25th anniversary of my father's death. He taught me how to sing and how to play golf. (He was much better at both!) He had a rich bass baritone voice and was among the pioneers among Baptists who were full time ministers of music who were ordained and served the church in fuller ways. He taught me to

sing the faith before I had to profess it! The right order. This also helped save me from the literalism of my Southern Baptist tradition. Words point, especially sung words, beyond themselves to the ineffable. Sometimes the poetic meaning is the literal meaning. That's how it was written to be.

He died during the Easter season that year. On Palm Sunday, when his life was in the balance, I wrote these words:

He will rise from the dead.

One way or another he will rise.

His rising will be like the rising of startled Lazarus,
the second to last of the great signs in John's gospel,
to let them laugh with him a few more years.

Or, like the rising of God's own son,

the final and greatest sign,

the Resurrection of the Lamb,

which is the first of all our Easters,

when the Common Weeping will become the Common Rejoicing,

and when the song of God will be in all,

in ways it was only gloriously so in some of our kind,
as in my father's heart and voice.

Let imagination begin to give form to your hope today. Whatever form it takes, it will all be grace. The old French priest in the novel, *The Diary of A Country Priest*, looks over his life. His last words at the end of the novel, are “*Tout est grace.*” *All is Grace*, or, *Grace is Everywhere*. This is the Way that God in Christ has given us to live. Living in the Resurrection is living by grace, in grace.

Amen

-
1. David Bottoms, “In a U-Haul North of Damascus”, *Armored Hearts* (Copper Canyon Press, 1995), 63-5.
 2. George Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (N.Y.: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1937, 1986)